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Empowering Our Ministry: How to Expand Our Worldview

Luke 16:19-31

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Over the past few weeks, I've been taking us on a tour of how we have come to have the doubts with which we live. The doubts we have, the unbelief that is present in our society (and in our churches), combine to present the power of God a seeming implausibility. Yet, how can this be? How can the God of Jacob and the God of Abraham, the God of Moses and the God of Gideon, how can this God of Israel, this One who brought Himself to us in the person of Jesus the Christ, and then in the person of the Holy Spirit, how can this God not be seen and known for who He is, clearly and by everyone?

This is the ongoing question for all believers. The classic definition of predestination seeks some kind of an answer. You have probably heard it. You approach a ravine or chasm with a narrow bridge that spans the gap. There is a large sign facing you. It reads 'You are Welcome to Enter the Kingdom of God.' If you do cross over the narrow bridge, and you are now on the other side, God's side, you chance to look back at the vista from which you came, and you notice that the same large sign has writing on it, facing into the Kingdom of God. This writing reads, 'I Called You to Be My Own Before You Were Born.'

What we thought of as our choice, is now understood to be the call of the Holy Spirit in our hearts. Does the truth of one side negate the truth of the other side? No, of course not. On the unbelieving side, we come to faith through our feelings and through our intellect and through the circumstances we encounter. There is little way we can understand or appreciate the ways in which the Holy Spirit has been working to bring us home to God. With perfect memory we might remember all of the people the Spirit brought to us, all of the conversations that planted seed or tilled our soil, but usually we only remember the final event or call or invitation that midwifed us to salvation. But, eventually, we learn and learn to love the fact that the Holy Spirit was there every step of the way.

And we, for our part, want then to be a part of someone else's journey. We understand that by our faithful responses to the nudgings of the Holy Spirit, by our steady prayers, by our becoming trained to talk intelligently and lovingly of who God is and what God has done in our life, that we become willing participants in that other person's journey.

And this possibility is a good part of what this sermon series is about. To recognize unbelief in ourselves is to notice unbelief in others, and to detect, to distinguish, to discriminate God's worldview from the secular worldview that surrounds us. Please understand this - our claim is not that Christianity will make sense to everyone or will enable the world to run more smoothly. Our claim is that it just happens to be true. The Bible reflects the way God is.

Do you see the point I am making here? Though Christianity makes sense and is credible, we make no claim that Christianity is universally obvious. If we were to say this, we would have no way of explaining why there are still people who disagree with Christianity, except by saying they must be irrational and, since 'rationality' is said to be our most important human

characteristic, they must be subhuman. No, we don't say this and we won't say this. As Christians, we can fully understand why others may disagree with us. When they disagree, it's not a sign that they are irrational, less than human, or evil, because we do not claim that our Christianity is about rationality, humanity, or goodness in the abstract or the general. Their disagreement may be explained in that they may not happen to know or follow this Jew from Nazareth.

So our faith community, here at CPC, will not make a lot of sense to someone who doesn't know the story of Jesus. A person has to know the story, see the vision, be a part of God's people. We have to find ways to discover God acting in our lives, as Ethel did, and then retell the story, reset the vision, and urge each other to do the same, and more.

In this story from Luke, the point of the conversation between now dead rich man and father Abraham is found in the last verse, "Abraham said to him, 'If your relatives won't hear Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced if some one should rise from the dead.'" Why didn't the rich man understand or see God? He had all the training of any other Jew. What stopped him from coming home to God in faith?

Simply, he didn't want to see. We may decide to see or not to see. We may be willing to be touched by God or hold out for a bigger touch. At its root, this is a form of spiritual pride. You know the story of the man in the middle of a flood. As the waters reach his front door, a boat with would-be rescuers comes by, but he declines to join them. As the waters rise, he goes to the second floor, and a large wooden platform floats right by the window, but he declines to get on board and glide to safety to the nearby shore. When the waters rise yet again, he climbs to the roof, and when a helicopter hovers above him, and lowers a rope basket, he waves them off. Later, after he has drowned, he asks God why he wasn't saved from death. Spiritual pride is like this. We have the answers we need to make the decisions we must, but we refuse these answers and insist on more convenient ones.

Seeing and experiencing spiritual realities are directly related to our willingness to obey God. Through obedience, we place ourselves in the context where the objects of faith may be seen and experienced.

To be sure, our experience both guides us and limits us. We all tend to have trouble accepting as real that which is past the reach of our experience. Expanding our worldview requires that we be willing to be placed in the context where we are confronted again and again with direct visceral experiences of the supernatural. Are you willing to go this way? Are you willing to let your experience be broadened? Think carefully before you say 'yes.' The demonic is real and will take notice of us if we go forward with spiritual renewal.

Many of us have friends who are 'into the spiritual.' To some extent, awareness of the spiritual realm is universal to all mankind. But seeing and experiencing the working of the Holy Spirit comes from the enlightenment of the same Spirit. This is what Paul is saying in 1 Corinthians 2: "The unspiritual person doesn't receive the gifts of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned." It's what Jesus is saying in John 3: "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born anew, he cannot see the kingdom of God." So, the bottom line is that you can't expand your worldview to include the spiritual realities of God's Holy Spirit unless you accept Christ as your Savior and Lord and become filled with the Spirit. There's just no way around it. Which is why last week, and again this week, and at other times in the weeks to come, you will be invited to come froward to receive Christ as Lord. It's the Holy Spirit who is working in you, not any words which I might utter, but we can offer you the opportunity to step from a place of spiritual pride, atop

that house of yours that's about to be engulfed with flood waters, and join us. That's the only way to come home to God.

Yet, there are many of us who are Christians, who are still uncertain we are willing to expand our worldview to include acts of supernatural power. I understand that. I understand that this 'worldview' I continue to speak about is largely subconscious. It's so much a part of us, and so defines our experience of reality and our identity that change poses a great risk. Such risk usually can only be undertaken in a context of love and trust. This is why I have waited for close to six years to begin this preaching. I have waited because I needed time to love you and develop a loving community of support that allows for vulnerability. Some will no doubt say I have not done so well, and they would not be ready to change their worldview. But others, and I suspect many of you, are willing to step out in faith and take some risks.

Lastly, a large measure of our acceptance of spiritual realities will depend upon whether we believe our fellow members and friends whom God will bless with experiences and acts of power. We will pray for signs and wonders. But will we believe those to whom the Holy Spirit will present himself? None of us have seen atoms or climbed Mt Everest but we accept their reality because those whom our culture deems reliable have experienced them. Yet the television evangelist who parades miracles and constantly asks for donations and then has a major moral lapse is hardly a credible witness. We must find those among us whom we can trust and be in this enterprise together.

I'd conclude by stressing that all of this is NOT to persuade you to believe in signs and wonders or the gifts of the Holy Spirit. These are not the objects of our belief! My purpose in these early sermons is rather to strip away all that may hinder our full experience of Jesus Christ as present, as real, and as active in our lives today. Western culture, just like every culture in its own way, has sought to tame Jesus Christ, to box him up, to make Him safe and manageable. By our worldview we have conformed our experience of Christ to our own image and expectations. The purpose of these messages is to conform our hearts and minds to Jesus Christ who is Lord and calls us to follow Him. It's in Christ that all that He wills and intends is possible.

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